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 The "G-men" hoods

The making of the

By Harry Kelly

Mafia connection

WASHINGTON—He sits in a restaurant sipping soup. He is wirey and nondescript in a dark suit and white wash-and-wear shirt. He could be a Bible salesman or the principal of a small town high school. Once he was a spy when spying was heroic.

Once he belonged to the kind of intelligence squads that break into homes or embassies, that read other people's mail, that use wiretaps and dirty tricks and "do anything else you could think of to get the job done," and he's proud of it.

Did he ever hear of the government using the Mafia?

"I think," he says carefully and slowly, "I heard of them using gangsters for one thing or another. I think that was during the war. . . . You should understand these operations are a form of warfare. You do what you have to do with what you have. People have to understand that."

SO IT began. It was the summer of '43, a nostalgic time for grizzled cloak-and-dagger veterans warming their old code books and memories by the fire.

Spies were heroic then—at least ours were—hunched over secret radio transmitters under the noses of the murderous SS or parachuting behind German lines.

E. Howard Hunt had not given spydom a bad name. The Central Intelligence Agency had not been created. The Federal Bureau of Investigation was full of good guys in snap-brim hats and starched collars, and Hollywood used its most super he-men, like Jimmy Cagney and Gary Cooper, to portray the sweaty-palmed secret agents breaking into Gestapo headquarters.

No one had thought of turning the Godfather into a James Bond. No one in Hollywood had thought it, that is. Too fantastic. But sly U. S. intelligence officials, those Brooks Brothers rough-necks, had thought of it.

"It was the OSS's [Office of Strategic Services] 'Wild Bill' Donovan who conceived the idea of getting 'Lucky' Luciano and other Mafia criminals out of jail, to use them not only to save Italy from the Fascists but to supply a corps of skilled safecrackers, housebreakers and assassins who might be put to constructive purposes in wartime," recalls Miles Copeland, a former OSS and CIA agent.

SO IT WAS only a new suspenseful chapter from an old, if largely unpublished book, when it was reported the CIA made contact with a pair of Mafia thugs in an alleged plot to assassinate Cuban premier Fidel Castro and that the FBI sought to turn the Mafia against American Communists in "Operation Hoodwink."

On July 15 in the momentous year of 1943, a lone American fighter plane—at first nothing more than an ominous speck against the pale Sicilian sky—flew in low over the town of Villalba.

A few miles away an Italian colonel by the name of Salomi commanded a brigade defending a mountain pass in the way of Gen. George Patton's onrushing Seventh army, according to a detailed account of the episode in Norman Lewis' book on the Mafia in Sicily, "The Honoured Society."

The American pilot circled and then dropped a packet near the home of Calogere Vizzini, the town's leading citizen. A servant who recovered the packet later told a newspaperman it

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contained a yellow silk handkerchief bearing the black initial "L."

FIVE DAYS later three American tanks clanked into the town square, one flying a yellow banner with a black "L" and commanded by an officer who spoke the region's Sicilian dialect.

The Americans were met by leading-citizen Vizzini, better known as Ben Calo, a legendary Mafia chief. Ben Calo, in shirtsleeves and suspenders, showed the American officers the yellow handkerchief dropped by the plane. He was invited to enter one of the tanks. Then they all moved off, roaring and clanking on their tracks.

The next morning, according to Lewis, it was found that two-thirds of Salomi's men had deserted, reportedly induced by the Mafia to take to their heels.

The black "L" on the yellow field, according to Lewis, apparently stood for Luciano, Lucky Luciano, the imprisoned American Mafia Don who had been born near Villalba.

LUCIANO HAD been sentenced to 30 to 50 years in prison on vice charges in 1936. But his influence in the rackets remained.

During the war, the Navy became worried about possibility of sabotage and spying on New York City's waterfront. Reportedly, they went to the boss, Luciano, still in prison. There were reports he helped clear the way for counterintelligence operations along the docks, including the placement of electronic listening devices on fishing boats. Some say he did nothing. But he was moved to a more comfortable prison and in 1945 New York Gov. Thomas Dewey granted him a parole for his contribution to the war effort, and he was deported.

COPELAND, THE FORMER OSS agent and author of "Without Cloak or Dagger," says the CIA used the Mafia to keep Communists from gaining control of Italian labor unions after the war.

"It was not until the OSS became the

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